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SOUTHERN WAR CLAIMS.

SPEECH

OF

HON. EDWARD S. BRAGG,

OF

WISCONSIN,

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

MAY 1, 1878.



WASHINGTON.

1878.

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S P E E C H
OF
HON. EDWARD S. BRAGG.

The House having met for debate, Mr COVERT in the Chair as Speaker *pro tempore*—

Mr. BRAGG said :

Mr. SPEAKER: This House has before it a bill entitled "A bill to reimburse the College of William and Mary, in Virginia, for property destroyed during the war."

There underlies this proposed measure, sir, a question of more than ordinary import. The discussion of it commenced with a glowing tribute paid the College of William and Mary and her renowned alumni by the gentleman from Virginia, [Mr. GOODE.]

The gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. EORING,] a classic son of Harvard, responded in an effort so replete with elegant diction and scholarly attainment and rich in historic reminiscence that the senses, for the time dazzled and bewildered by its learning and beauty, were captivated; judgment forgot its office and sentiment took its place.

I confess it an ungrateful task for a plain, blunt-spoken man, devoid of magnetism or oratorical art, but possessed only of an earnest conviction of the truth of his sentiments, to obtrude himself upon the scene to jar and disrupt with his discordant voice the delicious reveries produced by the sentimental elixir, so subtly administered. But, sir, a sense of duty to my countrymen, South as well as North, will not permit me to sit quietly by and see the great evil attending the passage of this bill fastened upon us by specious sophistry.

Words, with me, sir, serve their true purpose when used to express, not conceal, ideas. It matters not if I am called a bigot or fanatic, I maintain that this bill is a crafty device to foist upon us southern war claims as skillfully planned and as certain in results as the wooden horse that carried woe and ruin within the walls of far-famed Troy.

The amount proposed to be given is not large, but the shadow it casts before it is large enough to darken the land.

The reasons given are plausible; the disciple of Æsculapius gilds with a rich sugar-coating a noxious drug that the stomach of his patient revolts at, but when it is once swallowed the purpose is as surely accomplished as though no device had been used to make the vile dose palatable. So the learned doctor from Harvard has heaped the stores of his learning, thickly interspersed with sentiment, over and around this measure to hide its real meaning and significance, but the patient, beguiled by the garnishment into the adoption of the prescription, cannot escape its fatal consequences.

Before entering upon the consideration of these consequences, let us briefly review the alleged facts out of which this claim arises. They are recited by the learned advocates of the measures as follows:

During the first year of the war, until May, 1862, the college was held first as

barracks and then as hospital for confederate forces. From that time until the close of the war, except for a few hours on the 9th day of September, 1862, it was occupied by Union troops, and was used by them for the storing of military supplies and other purposes of convenience to our armies. In a skirmish on the 9th day of September, 1862, the main building was burned by the Federal forces, who occupied them, and at a later period of the war, during which the same forces held possession of them, all the remaining houses upon the college premises were, with the inclosures, burned wholly or in part pulled to pieces.

From this statement of facts, independent of positive evidence, which I believe exists, proving the same thing, I maintain it is apparent that the confederates, and not the Union troops, fired the building, and that they, and not we, are the vandals, if the burning was an act of vandalism.

Mark the statement :

From May, 1862, except for a few hours on the 9th day of September, 1862, it was occupied by Union troops for storing military supplies and other purposes of convenience. In a skirmish on the 9th day of September, 1862, it was fired, &c.

The question is pertinent, who occupied the college buildings for the few hours on the 9th of September, 1862, when the buildings were vacated by the Union troops? Rebel cavalry in flagrant war. The report shows there was no fire before they took possession, but one broke out soon after they left. To one familiar with the operations of such raiding parties this tells the story as well as a cloud of witnesses. But the committee find that after the building was retaken straggling soldiers, inflamed by liquor and smarting under defeat, fired it. That is to say, the committee find, as one of the grounds to sustain this bill, that rebel raiders were too generous to destroy Yankee stores and so the Yanks from sheer spite burned their own. I submit to my friend from Mississippi, [Mr. CHALMERS,] who won distinction in the cavalry service, whether such magnanimity on the part of cavalry was ever known until discovered in a congressional committee-room.

But, sir, I only allude to this cavalry phenomenon as an incident of what is sought to be made history to give coloring to the prayer for relief. In my opposition to this measure I stand on no nice distinction as to whether one side or the other fired the building, but I take the broad ground that its destruction was one of the ravages of war, for which there is not the least liability for reimbursement. Such is the universal law of nations. It was settled by an American Congress in 1797, when Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe and many of the long list of the illustrious dead whose spirits have been invoked and memories revived and passed in panoramic view before this House in the early stages of this discussion were the directing spirits of this Government—

That the loss of houses, and other sufferings by the general ravages of war, have never been compensated by this or any other government.—*American State Papers ; Claims*, page 199.

Come, then, shades of the mighty dead, and open the eyes of these thy followers, and so direct their judgments that they professing the most unbounded admiration and reverence for your wisdom shall not for paltry alms violate your precepts.

But, sir, viewed in another light, the College of William and Mary forfeited any right which she may have had as an educational institution sacred from the touch of war by becoming herself an engine of war, an active participant in rebellion. She not only sent her pupils to the red field of battle with words of encouragement and blessing, but she banished the muses from her groves, threw wide open her gates, and made her venerable halls barracks for soldiery to destroy the Government from which now in all humility she asks recompense.

I do not state this too strongly; the report shows that before the footsteps of a northern soldier darkened her halls, they had been converted into barracks and a hospital, in aid of the rebellion. The learned faculty cannot plead ignorance of consequences in case of failure; but they never counted failure among the possibilities. I shall not go into details of the horrors of that war, and of its cost in blood and treasure. I deprecate the reopening of that subject on this floor as much as any man; but I say to the Representatives of the South, in all kindness, the discussion of it will last, and properly so, while you force it into notice by the presentation of claims resulting from it.

It is with you to withdraw the subject from discussion or to keep it constantly before us by introducing such claims as the present. It was a bitter, murderous conflict, and the battle was lost through no flinching of yours. The world never witnessed greater devotion to a bad cause, and your personal bravery won from your enemy respect and admiration. When the smoke of the conflict cleared away, like brave men, as you are, you bade farewell to the cause you could not maintain, and in good faith accepted the situation and came back to the house of your fathers to support and defend it against all foes, foreign and domestic.

Wonderful in its proportions as the war was, it has been followed by results still more wonderful, and he who sees the yielding of the barriers of sectional hate before an enlightened patriotism, and upon their ruins a reunion of national brotherhood being rapidly cemented, may exclaim of a truth—

Peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war!

I appeal to my southern friends on this side of the House, will you deliberately rake the ashes off the slumbering embers, and fan them into a blaze again? I believe in my heart you will not. But I am bound to tell you, and I do it in kindness, for though in war I was your open enemy, in peace I am your earnest friend, and as such I say to you "The people of the North will never submit to be taxed to reimburse your people, or your States out of the National Treasury for any losses that they sustained directly or indirectly from the rebellion." It was your rebellion, you have harvested its fruits, and must patiently bear its results, bitter though they be.

There may be men in the North—their voice has been heard on this floor speaking words of encouragement to you in presenting claims like this one for reimbursement; but it is no true expression of northern sentiment; they are the words of a siren that lures to death. You heard them and trusted them in 1860 and 1861; will you trust them again now?

Can you blame the North for their determined opposition to such reimbursement? Had you been victors instead of vanquished, would you have imposed taxes upon your people, groaning under the weight of a debt contracted in overpowering us, additional burdens to compensate us for our losses? Southern statesmanship is too wise and far-seeing for that. The democratic party of the North desires to advance your present interest and future welfare; but this does not mean relieving you from any of your losses, or assuming any of your obligations. She recognizes you in your present status as worthy of trust and confidence in all that relates to the present and future, and the States you represent as free, equal, sovereign States; and upon all questions disconnected with the war, she stands your true friend, believing and teaching that the prosperity of the common country is best advanced by the culture and promotion of the rights and inter-

ests of each and all of its constituent parts. Her policy is broad and catholic, and when it shall again prevail the burdens of Government will be lightened, class legislation will cease, the rights of the poor will be respected as well as the wishes of the richer, and an era of prosperity will dawn upon the nation.

The republican party was born of sectionalism; it grew to its great strength, fattening upon the fruits of the folly and madness of southern men, and now, when the people have sickened with its corruptions and violations of the written law, will you for the temporary gratification resulting from an insignificant appropriation, or a thousand of them, awaken a distrust in the northern mind of your purposes and make prophetic the declarations of gentlemen upon the other side that you are here in the interest of southern claims and that the fruits of a democratic majority in the Congress will be the consummation of your purpose? God forbid! You have felt the iron heel of central power upon your necks; you have seen your States robbed in the name of law by the myrmidons of a republican oligarchy; you have enjoyed the elective franchise under the dictation of a corporal and his squad, and have been deprived of the fruits of the ballot-box by unblushing fraud and crime that in barbarian China would have brought a judgment of "hari-kari" upon its perpetrators; but in enlightened, free America, instead of punishment it hath brought official reward to all connected with it, because they did the bidding of the corrupt party whose lease of power was extended by it.

In the light of the past, my southern friends, are you now willing to furnish again a battle-cry to your old enemy that shall place it again in power and enable it in its caprice to re-enact the scenes you have passed since the close of the war and your return to citizenship.

Southern claims is the last card left to the republican party to play. Upon it rests the last hope of the organization, and it is for you in a great measure to determine whether it shall prove the ruling trump.

It would be an act of injustice to my own belief and an act of greater injustice to you did I here hesitate to say that these claims, about which so much has been and will be said are not presented of your own volition nor in the hope or belief that they will or ought to be paid. Your sense of right, I feel safe in saying, is averse to the payment of the cloud of claims that find admittance here because of the great right of every citizen to present for consideration his petition or claim, whether it be just or unjust, so only that it be done in language that is respectful.

But men are not always permitted to act upon individual conviction. A member of this House is a representative; he acts for others more than himself; he is the agent through whom each individual constituent has a right to be heard. And when an impoverished constituency or constituent demands consideration he would be more than mortal if he could refuse to introduce his claim for relief to the consideration of this House.

We men of the North know and feel the difficulties under which you labor, and the delicate position in which you are placed, with Scylla upon the one side and Charybdis on the other. And for this reason I appeal to the Representatives of the northern democracy to stand by the pledged faith of their party and by an unbroken vote on this question save the country, save their southern friends, save their party from the baleful effects that will certainly follow this precedent.

Let it be known that under no guise, under no pretext will such claims be paid, and the work is done, and the pressure of a constitu-

ency in favor of such bills will cease, and the galleries of this House will be cleared of the hungry, anxious, eager crowd of claimants, that sit day after day watching and waiting for the hour to come when their claims shall be reached and passed.

We upon this side of the House are in no wise responsible for this condition of affairs. The republican party opened the door, in an effort to toll the southern voters into their camp.

The war had no sooner closed than "presto," hosts of loyal people were discovered, where nothing but black-handed treason had been seen before.

What produced the change? A willingness to vote the republican ticket, combined with the three great cardinal virtues of that party, addition, division, and silence, was an accredited test of loyalty. And to provide a reward for these loyal converts to radicalism a court was organized to adjust their claims, and a republican Congress commenced paying and continued to pay southern claims while it remained in power, until the sums paid its retainers footed up many millions. And when its power passed away their loyal wards were bequeathed to us as a legacy, when the scenes shifted again. Carpet-bagging had lost its prestige, and southern claimants lapsed into their original sinful state, and the cry against rebel claims to be paid by their northern democratic confederates became the burden of the song of every loyal republican campaigner in the North. And yet the fact stares them in the face that this bill was originally introduced by a republican and reported favorably by a republican committee, and is now supported most strenuously by a republican.

Such cant and hypocrisy is best described by designating it as the climax of modern republicanism.

I submit to you, men of the South, whether the men who availed themselves and are still seeking to avail themselves of the laws of a republican Congress providing for the payment to loyal southern men (so called) were in fact loyal to this Government during the war. I believe that you who know them best will bear me out in the assertion that their pretended loyalty was and is a sham and a fraud, and that the amount of losses claimed to have been sustained by them in most instances is fully equal if not a greater fraud than the pretense of loyalty that accompanies them.

There were no loyal men who remained in the South during the war. It was not in the nature of things. Their sympathies may have been with us in the outset, but it is not in flesh and blood to sympathize with men who are killing our brothers, kinsfolk, and friends, sacking our villages and towns, and laying waste our country, no matter in what cause it is done. He who professes he did so adds the sin of perjury to that of disloyalty, or proves himself to be devoid of the ordinary instinct of human nature and unworthy of the consideration or respect of anybody.

Whenever there was a show of loyalty it came from a class of men who sang "Rally round the flag" and the rollicking notes of "Dixie" with equal unction, false to either side in turn and thoroughly despised by both. I never believed in them when they were the *protégés* of the republican party, and think still less of them now.

But to recur more directly to the measure under consideration, I am bound in all fairness to admit that the friends of it disclaim it as a southern war claim but support it as a great educational measure. Their disclaimer does not change the character of the bill.

You may break, you may shatter the vase, if you will,
But the scent of the roses will cling round it still.

And so will this bill present all the distinctive features of a southern war claim, call it what other name you may. Such special pleading does great credit to the ingenuity of the pleader, but it will not and ought not deceive the people.

Is it really expected that the northern people will believe the lamp of science is to go out and the world be left in Cimmerian darkness if the college of William and Mary is not built up at the expense of the nation? There are eight other colleges in Virginia alone, namely: Washington and Lee University, Richmond College, Hampden and Sidney College, Randolph Macon College, Roanoke College, University of Virginia, and Emory and Henry College. Are none of these of sufficiently high tone to meet the requirements of Virginia's rising statesmen that we must donate \$65,000 to repair the loss sustained by a rebel corporation during the war?

Had the College of William and Mary clung as closely to the Government in the hour of her pride and glory as she does now in pursuit of alms, her sons would not have been cheered on to battle against the Union and her halls converted from the home of science and letters to barracks for rebel soldiery. If we give alms to her, caught in flagrant war, how can we refuse all other institutions of learning in the South, and there are many of them, which were destroyed or injured by troops in the progress of war?

If a precedent be established for institutions of learning, are we so blind that we cannot see that places of religious worship have equal, if not greater, claim, and are already pressing them supported by better reasons than are urged for this bill? Orphan asylums, lodges of benevolent societies, court-houses, State-houses, public libraries, and what then shall prevent the payment of individual losses? It is true there are several steps, but they are in order, and one is a logical deduction from the other, and is as certain to follow as morning follows night and noon follows morning.

If rebel corporations have a right to repayment can there be any appreciable difference in principle between paying the corporation and the corporators in severalty?

Facilis Avernii descensus. There can be no stop when you once commence; you may disclaim the precedent, but, like "Poor Rip of the Catskills," you will yield at each new temptation, soothing conscience each time by declaring "We won't count this one!"

The battle must be fought at the gate sooner than at the porch, at the threshold rather than at the altar. The hungry wolf cannot be driven from the door by meat thrown to him when he comes. No more will greedy claimants cease their importunate solicitation if their petition be ever heeded, be it never so slightly.

Mr. Speaker, I love and revere ancient institutions of learning as much as any man, but I state my candid convictions that sooner than pass this bill it will be far better for the country—better for Virginia herself—to keep the old college in ruins, a monument of Virginia's folly and madness, putting the simple inscription upon her broken arches—

Quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat:
Circumspice!